OUTBOUND TRIP TO ARIAKE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY 2014 (ANCT)

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A cold, icy embrace was our first welcome into the Land of the Rising Sun, Japan, where we met up with Yamaguchi-Sensei and Kono-Sensei of Ariake National College of Technology who brought us around Fukuoka that day. The first thing that we noticed was the renowned punctuality of the Japanese where everything follows a set schedule and timing, and nothing is late, not the bus, not the traffic, and certainly not the people. Providing a strong contrast to our Singapore where people, and traffic, being as busy as they are, are often held up.
A visit to Kyushu National Museum proved to be an excellent insight into both Japan’s architecture as well as their history. As an architecture student, the first thing that struck me was how the large roof mirrored the surrounding mountains, allowing the huge structure to blend in seamlessly. At the same time, its glass walls reflect the surrounding nature, and let in natural light, all the while keeping the interior temperature at a comfortable rate with its double-skin construction.
We were also introduced to the seismic isolation construction used which is one of the most popular means of protecting structures against earthquakes. This system, while expensive was initially thought of by some as excessive, as Kyushu is an area that does not get a lot of earthquakes. However, just when construction was about to be completed, an earthquake struck, causing damage. Due to the seismic isolation system, most of the structure was not affected and repairs could be done quickly and easily. Learning about all of this makes me feel fortunate for living in an earthquake free zone; just thinking about all the reparations and all the material costs that would add up in the midst of construction is more than enough to cause nightmares.
The first meal we had in Fukuoka was served in a bento. When we arrived, all the food were already prepared and laid out for us nicely. I was pleasantly surprised, as even though everything was booked and paid for beforehand, I expected that lunch would only start being prepared for us when we arrive. Because this is mostly what happens in Singapore, and people would cancel at the last minute. This shows me how the Japanese keeps to their appointments, and this creates a mutual trust with each other in the society.

What surprised me though, was the lack of forks and spoons. For us Singaporeans who are more used to dining with spoons and forks, using the chopsticks proved to be quite a dilemma, even for me as a Chinese. It shows us just how much they value their culture and how they imbue it in their daily lives. While in Japan, I’ve used chopsticks for almost every single meal, and it actually shows a certain amount of discipline for us not to give in and just use our regular fork and spoons.
That is not all, while in Japan, there is a very clear resounding “itadakimasu” accompanying the beginning of every meal, as well as a “goushousamadeshita” at the end of it. This is usually accompanied with clasped hands and a slight bow. Itadakimasu is basically a way the Japanese say thanks to all the plants and animals that gave their lives for the meal that you consume, as well as gratitude to all those involved, like the farmers, hunters, and the chefs. As Japan has a strong and healthy background of Buddhist culture, I am not surprised to find out that the simple greeting is related to the Buddhist principle of respecting all living things. As a Buddhist myself however, I can clearly see the difference in the strength of their belief as well as their respect for life. It might just be a force of habit, or just something that they feel comfortable with since that’s what they were taught to do since young, but I think that something simple like that helps to show us the strength of their unique culture and the difference between the Japanese and us Singaporeans.

While I am aware that there are many different kinds of Buddhists, those that I do know just refrain from taking in meat as a form of sustenance due to the study that animals can feel pain, but not plants and vegetables. And even though they do that, we do not have a greeting or any form of thanks said before we eat. The closest I can think of are the Christians saying grace before they eat, but that’s about it.

Another thing to note is that in Japan, it’s considered disrespectful not to clear your plate. This is also tied back to Buddhist philosophy that all life is sacred and that if you were sincere in your itadakimasu, you would finish your food. In actuality it is also more important to finish your rice then your dishes if you really cannot help it. As rice is considered a main staple, it is somewhat considered a discourtesy to the farmers who work hard for those rice grains. This should not come up as a problem though, as the portions the Japanese eat are usually smaller then what we are used to, and some of us would go for a second or third helping.

Unlike in Japan where wasting food is frowned upon, I noticed that as the privileged children that we are, we often waste food and are extremely picky. I think that this trip has taught me that food is precious and important, as are the efforts of those who make them, and that I should not waste food.
I was hosted by the Hirayama’s during my stay in Fukuoka, and this was my room.

It’s a very Japanese styled room which had a balcony and views of their miniature garden. I also slept in a futon instead of a bed and it was actually very comfortable and warm despite the cold weather.

My host also has this thing called a kotatsu, which is basically a table with a heater and a blanket. It’s the one furniture in the house that I realise everyone gathers around.

We napped, we watched television, we chatted, we had tea, we played with the family cat, we folded clothes, all at the kotatsu. To me, it felt like something of a place of gathering for the whole family, a place of warmth and comfort, and I felt blessed to be part of the moment.
This is my host, Haruna Hirayama-San, and their pet cat, Butch. Haruna is also an Architecture student like me, and while we were travelling to Tenjin by train, she drew the floor plan of her house for me to see! I was really impressed with the quality of the sketch.

She also showed me her current project, which was on an elementary school that was inspired by clockwork gears. It was very interesting looking at the plans they have on paper, and which are mostly hand drawn as compared to Singapore where we use computer applications more often to assist us.
On the last day, my host also brought me along to a Christmas party hosted by their English School, which I thought of as an interesting experience. It was similar to a potluck party where guests bring food and then share them with everyone. Simple games were played and there were Christmas gift exchanges as well.

They were very warm, very kind and were very interested in learning more about our culture in Singapore as well as the English language, and tried to communicate with me in English as much as possible. During my stay, my host has also brought me to Tenjin to see the city life, and the beautiful Christmas lights.
We were brought to the MANDA Coalmines, an industrial heritage site that is actually listed in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List. This coal mine, was the one which supported Japan’s industrial revolution and was the source of energy for the foundation of modern Japan. The two vertical shafts at the mines, were some of the largest of their kind in Japan and was built using the latest technology in the Meiji era. An interesting point to note was that this coal mine was used as a site for one of the scenes in the Kurouni Kenshin : The Legend Ends movie, and was a key point of the trip for one of our friends who was a fan.
KUMAMOTO CASTLE

Kumamoto Castle is one of the most impressive castles in Japan, with large grounds and a variety of buildings.

What appealed to me as an architecture student however was that this castle was designed by Kato Kiyomasa, an experienced veteran warrior who used his knowledge to build fortifications that were highly regarded for their strategic effectiveness.

Evidence of his prowess, was the fact that the castle withstood the siege led by Saigo Takamori during the Seinan Civil War, even when the troops were outnumbered and had already lost quite a number of buildings.

However, overlooking its history, Kumamoto Castles offers splendid views overlooking the city and the some 800 cherry blossom trees in its vicinity, making it one of the most spectacular places I’ve ever been to.
POTTERY

As a child, I experienced pottery as part of my primary school art curriculum, and this brought back some nostalgia from my childhood days.

I managed to make a cup as well as that wavy bowl in the picture. At first, I didn’t have enough clay for a bowl, but nearing the end of the class, my trip mates, who had left over clay, gave theirs to me and allowed me the opportunity to make a beautiful bowl that I was really happy with! :D

I realised that it took a lot of effort and patience with clay to produce beautiful pottery and has a new found respect for all the people who put in effort in to making their pottery and the like as it takes a lot of discipline and passion.

I had a lot of fun making and shaping my bowl during the pottery workshop! Although I did have a lot of help from the sensei, I felt really proud of my handiwork in the end. XD
We were brought to experience a lesson in flower arrangement, and were taught about how we should arrange it with the main flower first before we slowly add accents into it to complete the arrangement to fit a particular theme.

It was very interesting and fun as I have never been exposed to flower arrangement before. They also kindly gave us the metal holders and bowls that we used for our flower arrangement so that we could replicate the experience back in Singapore! :D
KYUDO

We were brought to experience Kyudo in ANCT, which is what we know as Archery in Singapore.

In Japan, Kyudo is a method of spiritual, physical and moral development, which is said to be synonymous with the pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty.

While trying out Kyudo for myself, I can see the amount of effort, control and discipline the students have while practicing in the cold outdoors. For us Singaporeans, the cold was close to unbearable and you could see majority of us huddled in a corner, seeking warmth.

One difference I spot between the Archery in Singapore and the Kyudo in Japan is that the way they grip the bow and the way they draw and release it is different. The wooden bows that they have are also much more powerful and are classified according to weight. I also noticed that they have a mirror in front of the archers so that they can check their stance, which is actually very helpful.
KENDO

We were brought to experience Kendo during one of our visits to the school, and were welcomed with a demonstration as well as a performance by the students, who later assisted us with the equipment.

It was also very interesting to try on the equipment, and I initially thought that the equipment and body armour would smell but it did not. The helmet was also quite bothersome to put on, as I could not wear my spectacles with it, rendering me half blind the entire time.

However it was very fun as we got to have mini “fights” between ourselves, and some of us even “ganged up” others! Just for a little bit of fun of course! :D
All in all, I had a great time in Japan, and really appreciate all the hospitality of my host family, my dorm buddy, as well as all the Japanese students and Senseis who brought us around and took care of us for the 10 days that we were there. A very big THANK YOU to all who made this trip possible! I learnt a lot and am looking forward to the next time I can see the students as well as the Senseis again!